

Dancing the Museum Black: Activist Animations of the Social

Thomas F. DeFrantz

Northwestern University, USA

Abstract This chapter considers concepts of activism and Black presence in experiences of dance in museums. Working through concepts of Afropessimism, Afrofuturism, and the theoretical gathering notion of a Black Commons, I will offer four case studies of dance in the museum that render the space towards collective Black possibilities. The choreographic works *Dapline!* (2016), *fastPASTdance* (2017), as well as a reconstruction of *Instead of Allowing Some Thing to Rise Up to Your Face Dancing Bruce and Dance and Other Things* (2000) and the moving-image object *APESHIT* (2018) offer evidence of a special possibility for Black dance in the museum space; a creation of social space too-often denied to Black people in diaspora.

Keywords Afropessimism. Afrofuturism. Black dance. Black Commons. Activism.

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1 Museums and Black Commons

What I want to call a *Black Commons* could be a “gathering notion” (Outlaw 1996, 64) for concerns of Black life that arrives in contradistinction to hegemonic modes of white supremacy and Eurocentric constructions of social space. While the Black Commons originally referred to the need for land in the context of the United States (Mestrum 2013), or the structure of activities that allowed enslaved Africans in the Americas (Roane 2018), by now, a Black Commons might be a theoretical social space that emerges somewhat in relation to white systems of structural domination, but as a space that cares for the possibilities of Black life. A Black Commons can mobilise political action, and remind Black people of a shared potentiality through practices of artmaking, social assembly, worship, and imagination. A Black Commons might be a place of “study”, explained by Fred Moten as “the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities [as] already present” (Harney, Moten 2013, 110).

It may be that museums and Black Commons arrive as antithetical propositions. Where museums try to gather information and objects and organise them according to some systematic matrices of category and relationship, Black Commons emerge as spaces of multivalent disarray, built mostly from the relational sensibilities and aesthetics of a Black public in motion. Museums might tend towards the sustainable organisation of committed real estate, while Black Commons might be temporary and fugitive. Museums thrive in the quietness of reflection while Black Commons typically ‘sound’, and revel in the noisy, animated movements shared among lively people and the always-shifting reckonings of relationship.

The Black Commons offers a particular mode of analysis towards considering dance and activism in the museum, especially in terms of practices of dance that are endemic to Black life or fomented in Black common spaces. Thinking with the Black Commons as a mobile, fugitive constellation of social assembly that privileges Black life in its teeming diversities might allow us to understand activism in the dancing museum to arrive in an unexpected and transparent manner.

This chapter explores the Black Commons in relation to two important trending theoretical models of cultural production: Afropessimism and Afrofuturism. These conceptual interventions each suggest ways that the mainstream museum repeatedly fails to gather the concerns of Black people or facilitate the crucial emergence of a Black Commons. In pursuing these related lines of flight through Black thought, I argue that the mainstream museum is repeatedly curated as anti-Black. As we consider dance in an intentionally Black circumstance of the Studio Museum in Harlem, as well as in mainstream venues of the Pompidou and the Louvre, we will note how ‘dancing the museum Black’ will be to animate the space differently; to pay attention to the impermanence of dance as a lever to reconsider how art might be assembled, and the limitless potentials of bodies in motion to foreground activist activity.

2 Afropessimism and Black Thought

Recent attention to Afropessimism as a lever to understand the shifting terms of Black life in the world forces us to consider the socio-political terms of an encounter with the museum space. In short, Afropessimism wonders at the pre-acceleration of disavowal that surrounds Black existences, so much so that Blacks shimmer into and out of the category of ‘human’ (Jackson 2020; Hartman 2019; Sharpe 2016). Afropessimist thought wonders at the Black assembly that is always already circumscribed by political incommensurability: by all accounts of colonialism, slavery and apartheid, Black life should not exist (Mbembe 2017). And yet, Black life is integral to understanding the emergence of Western modernity. As an always-present alterity, Black life describes a non-state of being that allows the scaffolding of white hegemonic sociality.

Frank Wilderson’s vision of Afropessimism arrives as

less of a theory and more of a *metatheory*: a critical project that, by deploying Blackness as a lens of interpretation, interrogates the unspoken, assumptive logic of Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and feminism through rigorous theoretical consideration of their *properties and assumptive logic*. (Wilderson 2020, 14; italics in the original)

Reaching toward a “higher level of abstraction than the discourse and methods of the theories it interrogates”, Afropessimism concerns itself with a relational logic that places Blackness in opposition to the assumptive category of “human” (14). Theorising how it is that “the Black is needed to mark the border of Human subjectivity” (164), Afropessimist thought confirms that “Blacks are the sentient beings *against which Humanity is defined*” (167; italics in the original).

In this, Black presence might always be bound up with animations of modern culture. And Black presence in the space of the museum speaks directly to the distensions of social life that produce white hegemonic normativities, as well as fantastical elaborations of possibility. In opposition to the “provisional rendering of humanity” of Black life that cultural theorist Zakkiah Jackson asserts, dancing Black presence in the museum could resist “the specter of nullification” which is “precisely the work that racism does” (Jackson 2020, 16). Dancing, we might animate beyond the “status crime” of Black presence (Hartman 2019), and activate toward an artful potential of vibration and expression.

3 Dancing the Museum Black: Studio Museum of Harlem

We gather in a small crowd in the streets of Harlem, pressing against each other in order to see the moving bodies dancing inside the museum. Sightlines are difficult, and after a short while, we are admitted into the galleries. Passing through exhibitions, we are greeted by a vibrant African American male character sporting a phenomenal red three-piece suit. He approaches us, one and the next, and asks us to dance with him. It doesn't matter whether we know the steps; he shows them to us as we move through the room, dancing alongside us and cajoling us to smile and move with him as he sings and guides us through the space. He releases us into the next room, happily prepared by our brief participatory moment to be surprised by our encounters with diffuse, bleeding and blurry electronic sounds and the stage rendering of dance that follows. We enter the performance space of the museum alive in our assembly as Black and Brown people, collectively ready to be enlivened by dancing alongside each other.

The multi-sited work *Dapline!*, created as an initiative of autodidact multi-disciplinary African American artist LaMont Hamilton, moved through the Studio Museum of Harlem in several performances in 2016 [fig. 1]. The work arrives variously: as a documentary film project, as a series of photographs, as an ethnographic study composed of interviews by the artist with a number of African American Vietnam war veterans, and as a choreographic work embedded within a series of performative tableaux encountered by museum visitors. The performance installations occurred at the museum on 28 February 2016, and involved the participation of sound artist Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste, vocal artist Yaw and performance artist Yon Tandé along with Hamilton and choreographer André Zachery.

After museum visitors witnessed a short duet from outside, through the windows facing the streets of Harlem, they wound through the various exhibitions on display at the time, meeting performers who engaged them in conversation and song and exhortations to dance alongside them. Eventually, the public arrived in the lower-level performance hall of the museum, to sit in seats outlining a raised platform that accommodated a theatrical dance



Figure 1 *Dapline!* by LaMont Hamilton and André Zachery. Pictured: (front) Andre Cole, TJ 'Rocka' Jamez, (rear) Martell Ruffin, Ehizoje Azeke. Not pictured: Brian 'Hallow Dreamz' Henry, David 'TwiceLight' Adelaje, Johnnie Cruise Mercer, Yaw Agyeman. © LaMont Hamilton and André Zachery, and Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem NYC

invention. Six Black and Brown men moved through an elaborate danced rendering of the 'dap,' a stylised handshake and greeting ritual created by African Americans in the military as a system of private communication. As a dance, the work revelled in big leaping strides among gestures of explosive krump dancing, and permutations of rhythms of 'dap' greeting, with the whole infused with occasional slow-motion passages. At one point, they line up, then lie on the ground, as if they are victims of police brutality. The men, clad in simple black t-shirts and pants, allowed for a sweaty intimacy that surely transformed the museum into a site of serious play and careful consideration of movement as communication.

According to its promotional materials, *Dapline!* intended to represent "an intergenerational channel for Black solidarity, consciousness and identity". The work surely demonstrated underexplored creative crafting by Black people towards communication and affiliation, assuming the possibilities of a Black Commons in the Studio Museum of Harlem, an intentionally Black space. And yet, in several moments, a spectre of Afropessimism peeks through the choreography, as when the men lie on the ground, with hands clasped behind their backs in subjugation. Moments of competitive encounter between the men predict battles that no one will win. In some ways, *Dapline!* affirmed a connection of Black abjection through time, entwining an Afropessimist point of view within the presence of men engaging in rituals of greeting and communion. At times, the work did "tend-toward the void of Black subjectivity" proposed by Afropessimism (Zondi 2020). And still, *Dapline!* suggested an activist intervention as it constructed a temporary Black Commons in its organisation, and then reminded its audience of the limitations of Black humanity within worlds of white supremacy.

'Activism' has become a way that we might understand social encounters to be both mutable and as pivot towards concerns of social justice. For Black people, activism becomes a mode of creative life; a lens of imagining social possibility through the organisation of stakeholders who might transform a political landscape towards social progress and self-determination. Because museums routinely display artworks in shows that underscore the achievement of individual artists or curators in terms of self-representation or the will to assemble, it might be expected that museums could be sites of social activation that leads towards concerns of social justice or reparations for Black publics.

However, museums are rarely included in the histories of concerns of social justice. In 2017, the exhibition of a tribute to the murdered young African American citizen Emmett Till painted by a white artist sparked a tribute in the Whitney Museum of New York (Eckardt 2017). African American activists and their allies staged a series of events designed to turn attention to the concerns of Black people, mobilised by the depictions of Black trauma that the painting incited. Activists wrote letters, mobilised media outlets, and published cogent accounts of how the exploitation of Black experience by white artists has long formed a backbone of museum cultures. In person, Black activists stood in front of the painting for hours at a time, obscuring its view by others who might enter the gallery. The controversy surrounding the painting brought attention to an artist whose work is seldom concerned with Black lives of Black loves.

The mainstream museum - one not explicitly designed to gather the concerns of Black people or the emergence of a Black Commons, in the ways that the Studio Museum of Harlem, or the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco strive to be - struggles to accommodate Black presence. Black presence inevitably arrives as an engagement with political concerns of inequality, police violence, asymmetrical access to resources, cultural disenfranchisement, and intersectional marginalisations that eventually force forward concerns of social justice. While some art projects might want to address these systems of structural inequality, many works of art turn toward axes of expression for an individual white artist without seeming regard for collective social action.

And yet, Black presence also arrives in relation to a diasporic rendering of artmaking as a daily activity. Black cultures engage art, and especially music and dance, in rich tapestries of social imperative. A Black Commons emerges as the public assembly that includes *performance beyond [white] governance*; a temporary space where Black dance and music allow for an expression beyond the terms of white supremacy and hegemonic politics of respectability. In this rendering, Black music and dance activate concerns of an expansive re-orientation of social assembly. Dancing the Museum Black, the museum can be rendered differently, as a temporary site of Black possibility.

As the example of *Dapline!* demonstrates, dancing the museum Black offers an "otherwise way of being" for visitors and artists alike, opening unexpected portals of body and presence (Crawley 2017). At its best, dance in the museum moves beyond a here and now that might be the concern of the political moment. And yet, dance and its operations always arrive enveloped and entangled in the political moment. We must wonder at the tension between dance as a practice that supports its own mobilisations, but simultaneously dance as a practice that can turn our attention to a political concern well outside of the framework of its occurrence.

The obvious defining possibility of dance in the museum has to do with breath and liveliness featured as possibilities for 'temporary human relation'. In this, we turn our attention not to representations of dance, as in films or mediated objects including paintings or sculpture, but to the liveliness of performance as a structuring tool for understanding relationship. Live performance embedded into museum exhibitions offer us an opportunity to consider how breath and sensorial vibration allow a re-orientation for visitors and artists in the crafting of time spent in the museum's container. Live performance - by artists or visitors to the museum space - offer vivid and urgent portals of entry to considerations of presence and activism.

To think in this manner, we acknowledge that live art or live artists in the museum space are always already considered exceptional presences when they occur. After all, live performance tends to be structured by time, and even durational performances have beginning and ending gestures that mark their ephemerality. Museum objects, and the structuring logics of collection-building, indicate a tendency toward permanence as well as the construction of an archive. The museum emerges from a teleology of withstanding time and crafting of cultural stabilities. By way of contrast, live performance in museum spaces activates a specialness, or a state of aesthetic exception. This exception heightens attentiveness from visitors and performers, rendering the museum differently when performers are present.

To call on a 'state of exception' in the arrival of living artistry within the space of the museum heightens an understanding of risk as an essential aspect of live art performance, and dancing museums (Agamben 2005). This is a reasonable reference to a sort of 'bare life' that subtends the riskiness and awkwardness of museum performance. Thrust into spaces and circumstances that were not designed for its presence, dancing in the museum heightens a sense of mysterious difficulty, or unexpected possibility, and an out-of-placeness that deserves attention.

Dancing the Museum Black arrives as a fundamental contradiction. The dancing cannot be archived as its realisation among us in sweat and smell, as an emergent strategy of unexpected choices, navigated moment-to-moment by dancers and witnesses. We might be able to capture the movements in some manner, but we have no secure way to transcribe or relate their feeling with comprehensive accuracy. The dancing museum activates a 'something else' in its emergence. While some researchers are surely compelled to account for practices of archiving museum performances, the ongoing encounter with gravity that characterises human life and liveliness exposed by live performance probably exceeds the documentary and existing archival logics of the museum as institution.

These arguments intend to establish the contested ground that surrounds dancing museums, and some logics of activism as an implicit component of this activity. Activism as a turning towards social relationship is also at issue here. As we consider the placement of dance in the container of the museum space, we consider legacies of appropriateness and capacity that will always be exceeded by the labour of dancers moving through circumstances that were never crafted for them. This would also be the circumstance of political activism, to move with intention through difficult circumstances, in order to force some sort of political, legislative, or social change.

4 Articulations of Black Dance

Black dance offers capacious encounter for any variety of movement ideologies (DeFrantz 2019). Black dance might include aspects of modern dance, postmodern dance, contemporary dance, experimental work, ballet, tap dance, and on and on. Because Black dance, like the Black Commons, operates as a gathering notion for modes of movement, its terms of aesthetic production are open to encompass genres and styles adapted from a number of sources, including those defined by cultural outsiders.

By way of its obscure and diffuse definition, Black dance animates the field of dance differently than categories of ‘modern dance’ or ‘ballet’ or ‘durational performance’ might. Black dance emerges as a catch-all designation that refers to a process of performance, and many researchers have detailed the impossibly bulbous task of articulating Black dance (DeFrantz 2019). For this discussion, we pay attention to the political aesthetic dimension of Black dance as a process of extension and elaboration. Black dance renderings, which might be recognisable to participants in a Black Commons, extend any form of practice towards something beyond its originary methods, towards the concerns of a particular present and the structuring logics of Black life that arrive inevitably outside the comforts of hegemonic whiteness.

5 Dancing The Museum Toward Black: Centre Pompidou

At times, a Black Commons might emerge briefly, in a serendipitous manner, as a by-product of dancing museums circumstances. The large *Danser Sa Vie* exhibition included the Tino Sehgal work *Instead of Allowing Something to Rise Up to Your Face Dancing Bruce and Dan and Other Things* (2000). Termed a “constructed situation” (Von Hantelmann s.d.), the work is comprised of a long dance phrase performed continuously by a series of interpreters, with each performer working through the movement materials for a couple hours at a time. The work looks like dance to those of us who are accustomed to looking at dance, or to those of us who dance ourselves. Still, some art critics claim that it does not look like dance, but rather like slow-motion physical phasing of vibration; a task that allows a body to become a work of art.

Inside this sort of assessment, we might sense an orientation away from dance as a possibility worthy of exploration towards the making of something else - something more relevant to the historical context of the museum. Sehgal’s work gains in worthiness to the degree that it relates to the work of visual artists Dan Graham and Bruce Nauman; to the degree that it resists being aligned with previous practices of dance performance. Whether the work achieves this distancing depends on the witness and their expertise. As a dance, the work carries interest in its slow unfolding, its seeming movement-without-end. Like Yvonne Rainer’s *Trio A*, the work seems to have little rhythmic punctuation or accents of physical gesture; it is performed like a long physical yawn, across space.

I witnessed the work at the Centre Pompidou in 2011. I probably saw four interpreters move through the work and its propositions across a couple of hours of witnessing. The gallery that contained the work made no provisions for my activity as a viewer. There were no chairs in the space, nowhere to

rest or pause beyond a leaning on against the wall, or a sitting on the floor of the gallery. While I did sit on the floor, along with other visitors at times, this action was uncomfortable and felt wrong, considering the terms of my arrival in the space. If the work encouraged my witnessing in any way, it was in a short-term encounter of standing for a few minutes and moving on to the next room. In order to witness the entire sequence of movement, I would have to accommodate my own comfort, lying on the ground at times, or even sitting on the floor which would attract unwelcome attention from other gallery visitors.

At times a group of people would gather to witness the dancing, but the group seemed to form because it thought something interesting might happen. But the uninflected movement passages contain little interest in attracting attention or energetic assembly; an hour spent contemplating the movement might be a bit like watching clouds float overhead listlessly and only with the purpose of their movement as part of the weather. The interpreters completed the unenviable task of moving slowly without regard for the energetic vibrations of the people who might witness their labour. Dancing as if to deny any sort of vibrational connection to others is no easy task for performers trained to modulate physicality according to a number of physical techniques. Interpreters for this work had to be carefully trained artists, able to move with the continual serenity of a wondering through time. And yet, the work demanded that the performers offer no emotional or relational cues to their public; dancing as if they were not really there in the museum gallery.

Sehgal has more recently made many performance works for museum spaces that call on diverse arrays of performers to complete tasks that might be difficult or unusual. Children and elders are engaged to hold conversations with museum visitors; strangers move according to a simple movement score comprised mostly of tempi for walking while simultaneously telling stories about life-changing moments. Yet this earlier work, *dancing bruce* and the more famous *The Kiss* (2003) deploy trained dance interpreters, even as they ask those dancers to resist the deployments of energy that might constitute performative affect in order for the 'live art object' to be acquired by the museum. Remarkably, when Sehgal's 'constructed situations' are included in collection listings for major museums, the notations seldom reference the fact of live interpreters. This omission points toward an orientation away from caring for dance or dancers as co-creators in the process of dancing museums.

At one point, a gender non-binary interpreter with recognizable African ancestry performed "...dancing bruce...". Witnessing that particular rendering of the work, I allowed myself to feel something else in the work. Something of resistance, and a desire to charge the space of the museum gallery. Our presence together in the room did that, with me witnessing a performance, while briefly, no one else was there; a connection of the eyes even as the performer twisted slowly away from me. A rendering of a momentary Black alliance in the gallery; the very modest seedlings of a possible Black Commons that could be animated sometime soon, somewhere else.

6 Dancing the Museum Black: The Louvre

Jay-Z and Beyoncé, known as the Carters, crafted a moving-image object that placed dance in the grandest of all museums, the Louvre, in their 2018 creation *APESHIT*. This widely-discussed manifestation of a mediated dancing museum deserves attention here for its actual movement vocabularies (Crawley 2020). Working with more than a dozen dance artists and consultant choreographers Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and JaQuel Knight, along with director Ricky Saiz, the Carters present a museum dancing in accord to particular African American dance and music innovations of the late 20th century (Plate 2019).

The song *APESHIT*, written by the Carters with Pharrell Williams, calls forth trap music, an atmospheric genre of hip hop that builds from emphatically synthesised, electronic musical landscapes that suggest the shifting fortunes of African American neighbourhoods disadvantaged by unfair housing and labour practices. Trap music refers to the circumstance of Black American life as being lived 'in a trap' of continual, unfortunate circles of disavowal.

Trap music aligns itself with the terms of Black life for many, but it does not need to be an Afropessimist exploration of foreclosed possibility. Indeed, trap music promotes a certain sort of Black Commons that acknowledges affiliation across Black identities through our liveliness in music and dance. And *APESHIT* arrives as a glamorous, fully realised rendering of trap music, backed by all of the production value that money can buy. The production of the music video also demonstrates an abandon by way of economic and corporate privilege as the Carters and their affiliated artists take over the Louvre and activate dancing in front of large paintings and sculptural objects that are never witnessed by a general public without the crush of large crowds. Beyoncé and the uncredited dance artists move in the sinuous, hip-rolling gestures of J-sette and jazz dance, and an insuppressible attack at the front of the musical beat in passages of theatrical krumping. Appearing in a variety of costumes among the venerated objects, the Carters animate the museum toward an explicitly Black American possibility, one that engages rhythm as a component of presence, and one that considers dance as a necessary creative activity in response to other works of art.

The finished video of APESHIT does not include much dancing at all, really, but the bits included routinely exceed the visual backgrounds of the various objects on display. This dancing beyond place excites the state of exception. White visitors and guards, docents and curators are entirely absent from this fantastical invention. The utter Blackness of the encounter contributes to the patently activist intention of the work. The museum is danced Black, and for a moment, a temporary Black Commons arrives in the spaces of popular culture media, rendering the Louvre available to those of us who might never go there, or witness its contents, enlivened, otherwise.

7 Afrofuturism

A counterpoint to the concerns with Black social death that characterise Afropessimism might be the progressive and technologically-infused inventions of Afrofuturism. Typically, Afrofuturism is narrated in terms of speculative science fiction laden with fantasy imagery of aliens and cyborgs; Funkadelic music and its progeny, the electronic, vocoded soundings of a digitised Black soul music; festooned costuming that references other-worldly space-travelling indigenous populations; and the ironic implications of dense cultural criticism projecting an impossible future rife with Black corporealities cognizant of middle passages. Irony is surely a key component of how Afrofuturism achieves social traction. Common assumptions surrounding a future/presence of blackness might assume an assimilation that could render the Black unrecognisable; a hue among many without specific cultural imperatives. Afrofuturism, though, assumes a tangible Black affect present in an entirely mediated future; not a future without race, though one with an abeyance of racism; not a future without Black ministries, though one with a release from the primitive-naive analyses consistently associated with the Black church; not a future without Black subjectivity, but one that evades the inevitable yoke of subaltern status. Instead, it is a future of queer, trans- and hetero-cis Black people engaged with the fabrication and deployment of technologies (DeFrantz 2016).

British theorist Kodwo Eshun and American artist DJ Spooky (Paul Miller) narrate the musical in Afrofuturism as breakbeat science, or rhythm science, which suggests the alignment of so-called hard scientific analyses – beats per minute, tiny differences in particular technologies of musical production, engagements with software and hardware, histories of invention and product creation – with the undeniably soft esoteric spaces of playful literary translation (Eshun 1999; 2003). As a concept, breakbeat science legitimises Africanist rhythmicity to post-Enlightenment doctrines of value. In writings, recorded explorations, and performances, breakbeat or rhythm science authors fast-forward to a somewhat obscure space where concepts of affect are defined by their digital coding, and still allowed to be mysteriously fun (Miller 2004).

The Afrofuturist space shimmers in anticipation of a future always just beyond imagination. Afrofuturists demonstrate responsibility ‘towards the not-yet, towards becoming’ to create aspirational space that speaks to social ambitions enlivened by artmaking practice. This may be something like the queer utopia that theorist José Esteban Muñoz predicts, one that is always out of reach, in part because its value lies in its pursuit. Muñoz wonders about queerness as horizon, or queerness as an ideality; a horizon imbued with potentiality. Queerness as a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel “beyond the quagmire of the present” (Muñoz 2009). Like Afrofuturist performance, Muñoz’s queer futurity imagines itself ahead toward possibility.



Figure 2 Carmen Carriker in the SLIPPAGE production *fastDANCEpast*, 2016. Detroit Institute of the Arts. © SLIPPAGE

8 Dancing the Museum Black: The Detroit Institute of the Arts

The SLIPPAGE project *fastPASTdance* deployed a green-screen interface to project artists of colour into the imagery painted by artists represented within the 2016 Detroit Institute of the Arts show *Dance: American Art 1830-1960*. The *Dance* show included some 90 works from storied American artists including John Singer Sargent, Mary Cassatt, Harlem Renaissance stars and artists who shaped the aesthetics of modern dance including Isamu Noguchi, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol. While the show opened in Detroit, it later toured to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and the Denver Art Museum [fig. 2].

SLIPPAGE was commissioned to create an intervention for the opening weekend of the show in Detroit, which was repeated in the Crystal Bridges museum. I direct SLIPPAGE, and this particular creative invitation arrived alongside a range of activities that included writing for the exhibition catalogue creating a series of large-format, original moving-image objects describing dance from several points of view, and the live-processing performance intervention of the opening nights of the exhibit in two locations.

Our goal in crafting *fastPASTdance* was to trouble the paucity of Black presence in the many objects on display, and to embed a lively Black Dancing Commons into the proceedings of the museum. We worked with a two-channel installation that placed a small dance platform in one room of the museum, while a large-format projection setup in another nearby, but discrete, performance space. The larger space included a recognisable stage platform for dancing with a rear-projection image that acted as backdrop. The small dance platform was crafted as a green screen area, with a single video camera capturing the movements of interpreters who were able to hear the sounds piped into both spaces.

Audiences witnessed the interpreters in both spaces: in front of the green-screen setup, and in a much larger assembly, in front of the stage and the large video projection. Those who chose to watch the small stage engaged in an intimate encounter with the dancers, as the audience was

able to be quite near to the performers. In the larger hall, the event held a more familiar proscenium theatre-style arrangement, with the audience seated in rows and witnessing from a distance.

Audiences might have been unaware of the activist bent of the performance to insert Black and Indigenous performers into the objects of the exhibition where they had not been before. The interface designed for the event captured the movements of the interpreters and interpellated them into vibrating, bouncing versions of the artworks, in an eerie and provocative effect. The interface manipulated the performance materials, sometimes rendering gestures faster or slower than they had been crafted; sometimes doubling or tripling the dancer's appearances within the large-scale projection.

In all, the performance confirmed an uneasy contemporaneousness of performers of colour and the white subjects of the art objects on display, bringing Black dance into lively accord with a whitened past. Black ballerina, Black modern dancer, Black social dancers, Black tap dancer, and Black experimental artist, alongside an exceptional Native American performer, confirmed a Black Commons as a possibility for a museum in motion. As if in a futurist innovation, the Black performers brought unprecedented movement to the artworks, destabilising their completeness by suggesting Black dance as an antidote to the supposed permanence of permanent museum display.

9 Conclusion: Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death

In 1992, Black film theorist and artist Arthur Jafa imagined a "black visual intonation" that would echo prominent performative features of Black vocal intonation. Jafa predicted a future of filmmaking that could reproduce "visual equivalencies of vibrato, rhythmic patterns, slurred or bent notes, and other musical effects... samba beats, reggae beats, all kinds of things" (1992, 254). In short, Jafa predicted a sort of filmmaking that might construct the terms of a Black visuality tethered to an inviolable connection between music and dance in the Africanist grain.

Jafa returned to this intense, particular stylisation in 2016 when he realised a moving-image object that mobilises Black dancing to produce something well beyond its contents. Jafa's outrageous and despondent moving-image object that has toured several galleries and museums, it was featured as a simultaneous streaming event on 26-28 June 2020 on the platforms of eleven museums and private collections in seven countries. *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* embeds one hundred and fifty clips of Black American life into a seven-and-a-half mixture of potent, nearly unwatchable contrasts. Rife with contradictions, the short film points to the ongoing violence and racism that is foundational to US history and continues to operate in the present. And it also includes passionate, deeply-honed moments of dance performance, peppered among the imagery of disavowal and police brutality. And there is also a sun in supernova.

The short film enacts an ambitious and difficult rendering of Black dance as an activated expression of communal possibility, individual brilliance, and inexplicable diversities. Arriving in museums around the world, *Love Is the Message* aligned the difficult terms of a Black Commons with Afrofu-

turism and Afropessimism simultaneously. The pessimistic restatement of ongoing violence, adjacent to the futuristic renderings of an otherwise way of being, in a dancing beyond the terrible here and now.

Jafa's work confirms: to dance Black in the museum, we animate the space differently. We bring energy to bear in unexpected, particular pathways burnished by collective responses to a shared past of disavowal and rampant creativity. We force each other to see the gallery spaces and their collections differently; to acknowledge that 'our presence' in relation to these works of art actually 'matters'. We change the possibilities of space and architecture, energy and time, by leaping, twisting, standing, wondering, and challenging the quiet hush that typically pervades these hallways of culture.

Dance in the museum has a long, but checkered, past. It can be difficult to consider bodies in motion as worthy colleagues to the captured and stilled creations of visual artists. Dancing bodies are porous, unpredictable, and always-in-motion; visual works remain present like sentinels, awaiting our need as viewers for their encounter. Visual work can be bought and contained in museums; owned and loaned, acquired and kept. Hopefully, these features are less possible for the Black people who dance. Dancers exert their influence, forcefully, of their own volition, and then move on to dance somewhere else another day. Museums like the idea of dance and physical presence as art, but remain wary of the actual gestures of moving bodies that might harm or even touch the ever-waiting artworks. If the dance is truly ephemeral, it contradicts the impulse to create a hall to collect - 'permanently' - outstanding gestures of creativity. What can be permanent about the dance beyond its documentation and memory? Dance is not ever really quite 'here'; it is somehow always 'just there'.

Ultimately, the challenge for dance and its consecration into spaces of museums has to do with the inevitable 'failure to contain' that circumscribes dance. When visual artists create works that disintegrate naturally - as in Ann Hamilton's *myein* (1999) created for the US Pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale - we are all invited to enjoy the specialness of our encounter with art as impermanent as a leaf falling from a tree. Kara Walker's *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014) was installed for only two months in a Brooklyn factory space later reclaimed as condominiums; the work, covered by tons of sugar, sweltered daily and dissembled to reveal its foam 'bones' before its discarding. Guests at that showing wanted to lick the grand sculpture, to taste its uncompromising specialness, even as we all knew that the work would be no more than its photographs and descriptions in a short time.

Black dance, like these examples of impermanent art, knows that it is only for the right now; its essence of performative exchange is not superseded by films or critical accounts. Black dance in the museum brings forward the tension of our varied interests: in creativity that endures, and in expression that cannot last longer than its execution, even as its activation-presences remain.

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